Not in Our Name: The Voters' Pledge
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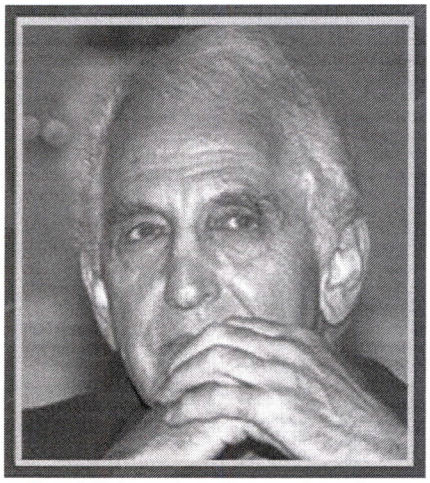

Dan Ellsberg is a former American military analyst who helped bring an end to the Vietnam War when he released the Pentagon Papers, the US Military's account of its scandalous activities during that war. (Photo: Democracyinaction.org)

According to recent opinion polls, most Iraqis don't believe that we're making things better or safer in their country. What does that say about the legitimacy of prolonged occupation, much less permanent American bases in Iraq? What does it mean for continued American armored patrols such as the one last November in Haditha, which, we now learn, led to the deaths of a Marine and 24 unarmed civilians?

Questions very much like these nagged at my conscience at the height of the Vietnam War, and led, eventually, to the publication of the first of the Pentagon Papers in June of 1971, 35 years ago.

As a former Marine Commander and defense analyst in 1970, I had exclusive access to highly classified defense documents for research purposes. They came to be known as the Pentagon Papers and constituted a 47-volume, top-secret Defense Department history of American involvement in Vietnam titled, "U.S. Decision-making in Vietnam, 1945-68." The Pentagon Papers made it very clear that I, like the rest of the American public, had been misled about the origins and purposes of the war I had participated in - just as are the 85% of the troops in Iraq today who still believe that Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11 and that he was allied with Al Qaeda.

That period had several similarities to this one. Congress was debating the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from Indochina while President Nixon was making secret plans to expand, rather than exit from, the ongoing war in Southeast Asia - including a major air offensive against North Vietnam, possibly using nuclear weapons. Today, the Bush administration's threats to wage war against Iran are explicit, with officials reiterating regularly that the nuclear "option" is "on the table." Americans saw the color photographs of the My Lai massacre; now we are seeing photographs eerily similar to those from Haditha: women, children, old men and babies, all shot at short range.

What was it that prompted me to begin copying 7,000 pages of highly classified documents - an act that I fully expected would send me to prison for life? I came to the conclusion that the system I had been part of, giving my unquestioning loyalty to for 15 years, as a Marine, a Pentagon official and a State Department officer in Vietnam, was a system that lies reflexively, at every level, from sergeant to commander in chief, about murder. And I had the evidence to prove it.

The papers showed very clearly how we had become engaged in a reckless war of choice in someone else's country - a country that had not attacked us - for our own domestic and external purposes. It became clear to me that the justifications that had been given for our involvement were false. And if the war itself was unjust, then all the victims of our firepower were being killed without justification.

That's murder.

Today, there must be, at the very least, hundreds of civilian and military officials in the Pentagon, CIA, State Department, National Security Agency and White House who have in their safes and computers comparable documentation of intense internal debates - so far carefully concealed from Congress and the public - about prospective or actual war crimes, reckless policies and domestic crimes: the Pentagon Papers of Iraq, Iran or the ongoing war on U.S. liberties. Some of those officials, I hope, will choose to accept the personal risks of revealing the truth - earlier than I did - before more lives are lost or a new war is launched.

Haditha holds a mirror up not just to American troops in the field, but to our whole society. Not just to the liars in government but to those who believe them too easily. And to all of us in the public, in the administration, in Congress and the media who dissent so far ineffectively or who stand by as murder is being done and do nothing to stop it or expose it.

Americans must summon the civil courage to face what is being done in their name and to refuse to be accomplices. The Voters' Pledge is one way to do this. The Voters' Pledge is a project comprising many of the major organizations in the antiwar movement, United for Peace and Justice, Peace Action, Gold Star Families for Peace, Code Pink, and Democracy Rising, as well as groups with broader agendas like the National Organization for Women,

Progressive Democrats of America, AfterDowningStreet.com, and magazines including the American Conservative and The Nation. The goal of this coalition is to build a base of antiwar voters that cannot be ignored by anyone running for office in the United States. We want millions of voters to sign the pledge and say no to pro-war candidates.

You can help right now by visiting www.VotersForPeace.US and immediately signing the Voters' Pledge.

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